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SUBJECT: DEPUTY PRIME MINISTER ESSAWI CONCERNED ABOUT
SECTARIAN GOI RETURNS IMPLEMENTATION

Classified By: Deputy Chief of Mission Patricia A. Butenis for Reasons
1.4 (b) AND (d).

¶11. (C) SUMMARY: Deputy Prime Minister Riad Al Essawi, meeting September 25 with Senior Refcoord and PolMinCouns, voiced dismay at the GOI's paltry assistance to Iraqi refugees, but is unlikely to be able to influence the GOI to boost assistance. Essawi expressed concern about whether the GOI was serious about supporting the returns of displaced Sunni Arabs, attributing this to the bitterness of Shia leaders who had been exiled during the Saddam era and pervasive sectarian impulses in GOI decision-making. Essawi viewed the Ministry of Displacement and Migration (MODM) as particularly weak, but downplayed the significance of this, given that security and not money was the determining factor in returns of IDPs and refugees. He assessed security conditions as unripe for large scale returns. Essawi, a Arab Sunni and formerly a senior MFA official, returned to the GOI as DPM in July, when the major Sunni Tawafuq bloc dropped their boycott of the government. END SUMMARY.

\$318 MILLION FROM U.S. -- \$25 MILLION FROM IRAQ

¶12. (C) Senior Coordinator highlighted U.S. humanitarian assistance for Iraqi refugees and IDPs, which had reached \$318 million at that point for FY 2008 and contrasted that with the GOI's 2007 allocation of \$25 million for refugees. We expected that this figure would expand with end of the fiscal year funding decisions. The U.S. was funding 65 percent of UNHCR's regional appeal for Iraqis, an extraordinary figure, far in excess of the norm, which rarely exceeds 30 percent in humanitarian emergencies. This was because the needs are so great and because the U.S. views itself as having a special responsibility to address Iraq's humanitarian situation. But, noting Iraq's cumulative budget surplus of \$79 billion, Senior Coordinator said that the U.S. Congress was asking increasingly hard questions about Iraq's lack of support for its refugee population in particular. The refugees, many of whom had come from the middle class, were slipping into destitution. Growing incidences of child labor and prostitution were among the most desperate responses. The refugees included large numbers of skilled people Iraq needed for its reconstruction and development. The more they felt abandoned by and alienated from the government, the less likely they would be to return. Expressing dismay, Essawi took careful note of the U.S. assistance figures and said Congress was right to ask questions.

THEY DIDN'T HELP US; WHY SHOULD WE HELP THEM?

¶13. (C) Essawi viewed the GOI as having consistently understated the magnitude and danger of Iraq's displacement problem. Essawi attributed this in part to the sectarian mentality of Iraq's leaders, many of whom had been, themselves, long term exiles from the Saddam regime. He said he had heard some of them say that the GOI did not support them when they were exiled, so why should they support

Iraq's current refugees, who are mainly Arab Sunnis and widely presumed supporters of the old regime. (One cabinet member who had expressed this view, Essawi claimed, was Energy Minister Shahristani.) As the GOI begins to enforce property rights and support returns, Essawi said that he was receiving a stream of complaints from Sunni leaders about the sectarian nature of the process in areas that had experienced massive mutual displacement such as Adel and Hurriya, Ameriah and Bayia. The GOI did not hesitate to evict Sunnis who were squatting in the houses of Shia, but was not as effectively taking action to establish the security conditions that would enable those Sunnis to return to their neighborhoods. GOI implementation of the new policy was forcing many Sunnis into secondary displacement, as they faced eviction from neighborhoods where they were displaced but remained unable to return home. As he observed the process, Essawi asked himself whether the GOI truly wanted to solve the displacement problem and commented that some in the GOI want to perpetuate demographic change. While acknowledging that some Sunnis were returning to mixed areas and a few to Hurriya, he said that the GOI needs to address returns comprehensively across sectarian lines. He was pushing for a collective approach to returns in key neighborhoods that would facilitate returns from both sides simultaneously to avoid secondary displacement. He said he had stressed this point in his meeting with Generals Odierno and Cooper, saying the GOI would need continued help from MNF-I in supporting the returns process in a nonsectarian manner.

SECTARIAN REFLEX

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¶4. (C) Noting that key figures in the returns process, such as MODM Minister Sultan and Implementation and Follow-Up Committee for National Reconciliation (IFCNR) Chairman Mohamed Salman were Shia closely connected to the PM, Essawi complained that even when the MODM had finally dispatched attaches to the Iraqi Embassies in Jordan and Syria, all of them had been Shia. When he had heard this, he had urged MODM Minister Sultan to include some Sunni staff to build credibility among the majority Sunni refugee community, but received the response that the PM had selected the officials.

(Note: According to UNHCR, one of the officials is a cousin of Minister Sultan. Sultan had reportedly proposed placing his son in Amman.) Essawi went on about sectarianism in the GOI budget process, citing as examples cabinet approval with minimal discussion of millions to rebuild the shrine in Samarra and open the Najaf airport, but nothing for Mosul or for the displaced.

MODM WEAK AND OUT OF TOUCH

¶5. (C) Senior Coordinator expressed our concern that while many Iraqis were aware of GOI promises of assistance, few people seemed to be receiving the payments. Essawi replied that budget execution was a serious problem across the board, but commented that MODM was particularly weak and that MODM Minister Sultan did not seem to know what was going on in his own domain. We raised the Minister's September 19 Sharq al-Awsat interview, in which he had blamed organizations assisting needy refugees as impeding GOI efforts to promote returns. Furrowing his brow, Essawi responded that Sultan was trying to deflect attention from the failures of his own efforts. He added, however, that payments won't solve the displacement problem because it is not a problem of money; it's a problem of security. Asked if provincial elections would draw people back or if Sunni leaders would encourage people to come back to vote, Essawi asked rhetorically how the leaders could ask people to come back if there was no safe place for them to go. We noted that the media were asking the Embassy to comment on the returns process. Essawi advised us to tell the media the truth) that conditions are not ripe for large scale returns. He said that the one thing

the GOI seems to fear and react to is the media.

COMMENT

¶6. (C) Essawi's comments on returns reflect the deep seated distrust of his Sunni Arab community toward the government. While we expect that he will voice support within the GOI for greater assistance to Iraqi refugees, we do not have great expectations that he will sway PM Maliki on this issue. Essawi may not have been aware of the extent to which the Iraqi Security Forces (ISF) are engaged to support returns to Hurriya. The ISF police commander for the district briefed Senior Coordinator, UNHCR and Second Brigade Combat Team September 28 on his support for the return of over 300 principally Sunni Arab families to Hurriya in September. (7,500 families were displaced from Hurriya in 2006 and 2007). Several Sunni Arab leaders have told us that if the GOI can solve Hurriya, it can solve the displacement problem across Baghdad. We will be watching developments in the neighborhood closely.

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